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How to Seek God.

THE DUTIES AND THE DANGERS

OF

A REVIVAL:

A Sermon

PREACHED AT THE SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
BOSTON,

ON THE 14TH OF MARCH, 1858.

BY EDWARD E. HALE,

MINISTER OF THAT CHURCH.

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S E R M O N.

JER. xxix. 13: "YE SHALL SEEK ME, AND FIND ME, WHEN YE SHALL SEARCH FOR ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART."

THE church of Christ divides itself, in practice, into two great branches. This division is none the less real, though neither of these branches has any distinctive name. For a considerable part of the Christian church believes that no man can of himself come to God; and also that only a fixed portion of mankind, elected beforehand, are ever so overwhelmed by God's Spirit as to be able to come to Him at all.

The other branch, comprising, I suppose, a majority in number of the whole church,—comprising *us* among the rest,—are sure, that, from the moment a child gains consciousness of his Father's existence, he can seek his Father, and find Him; that it is the privilege of every human being to seek Him, and find Him; and that the Holy Spirit, at every moment, is eager to meet every human being more than half way,—vastly more!

The branch which believes that only a part of us have this privilege do not attempt to say who make up that part. With a gallant firmness, therefore, to which scarce any thing else is to be compared, they eagerly array all whom they can in the ranks of the seekers; though they are forced to tell them, that of those who seek, if all should seek, only a few will find. It is something as when a gallant colonel parades his regiment in the besieger's trenches for the last time, sees their lines dressed, smiles cheerfully upon the men, and nods approval of their order,—he knowing, and they knowing, that when, in a minute more, the clock of the city strikes, he is going to lead them, under hot fire, down into

the gaping ditch, up the other side of it to the broken wall, over its fragments as they can, till, if they can, they scale those broken ramparts; that, there, those who are left are to charge bayonets upon rebels fighting for their lives within; and that, before the clock strikes again, perhaps a tenth part of them will dress ranks again as they parade again in the great square of the captured city,—the rest left bleeding behind. But it is only in part like this, however; because when the leaders of that wing of the church, with that admirable gallantry, so beg us all to seek our Lord, they are forced, by that belief which oppresses them, to say, “Some of you will succeed in gaining the glorious presence; and the others, who are not elected, will be left—not to the momentary pain of the merciful stroke of a grape-shot, but to be tortured for ever, you conscious all the while—in the agonies of an unending hell.”

On our side, we have that privilege, and blessed grace of God, that at every moment we may call on all to seek Him, and in good faith may say, confidently, that all who seek will find. The city of our heaven is not armed or fortified. It is an open mansion, where our Father begs us all to enter in.

Again, as I said in the beginning, that large, eager, faithful branch of the church which believe that some are elected to know God, and some, alas! are not, believes literally that men of their own selves can do nothing. It takes those words of Jesus away from the immediate comment which he made upon them; for he who said, “I can of my own self do nothing,” assured us in the instant of the constancy of the Father’s love, and lived and died to show us that we are never left to our own selves, even for an instant of our lives. That branch of the church forgets this. It believes, sincerely, that there are certain waves of the Divine Spirit when God comes near, and, of course, certain other waves when He goes away; and, in all the gallantry with which it calls upon us all to seek Him, there is always at heart the sickening feeling that He may not be seeking us, and so “all our toil be lost.”

On our side we feel as clearly, that, if we have not found Him, the fault was in the seekers. There was self-deception somewhere; there was mistake somehow. They did not search for Him with all their hearts. God is,—and is here. He never sleeps,—never turns away,—never “goes upon a journey.”

From all these peculiarities of their position, there grows up their practical system of education. I am eager to speak of this system with all honor, for the sincerity and the constancy with which it is adhered to. The boy or the girl is left, under this theory, without the expectation of their seeking for themselves Christian guidance, or assuming Christian responsibility, or living by the inspiration of the Spirit of God. Boy and girl, young man and young woman, are so left outside, and, as it were, systematically ranked among those who are not partakers of the grace divine. But, all the while, their position differs from the position of the heathen in this, that each of these young persons has watchful, faithful guardians, close by them in the church, waiting for some Providence to seem to indicate the moment when they also may try the great experiment, — when they may find out whether they are of the elect, or of the reprobate, — yes, find whether they are of the blessed, or of the damned. And those watchful friends are on the alert. Eagerly they wait for the dawning of the morning, and, when the first streak of a pale Aurora dapples the sky, call eagerly upon these who have been far from God, that now is the moment when they may seek Him. I am eager to do all honor to the steadfastness with which they watch for that golden opportunity.

Our system ought to be the reverse of this; but it ought to be as eager and watchful. Nobody can say better than you and I what it is, if *saying* were all. We teach even our babies to say, "Our Father." From that moment, till they leave us men and women, and take charge of their own lives, you and I have no excuse if we are not instant, all the time, to bring to those growing children the consciousness of God's constant presence, and to make them feel, even in boyhood and girlhood, that His heavens are no longer shut up against us; that every day of their lives they may be looking and feeling for His love, as it is made manifest to us all in the Son of Man. The eagerness which our friends of the other wing feel and show for their young people, at the blessed moment when they think they see the dawn breaking, is the eagerness which you and I ought to show for our children always; living, as we say we do, in the sense of constant absolute presence of our God; believing, as we say we do, that His kingdom is at hand.

When that sad side of the church thinks it sees the first flash of the Aurora for which it has been praying and wait-

ing ; when its faithful watchmen upon their ramparts cry out, as John the Baptist did, "The morning comes!—our God is here!"—then follows, of necessity, what is fitly called an Awakening or Revival. Among the writers who belong to that side of the church, I find occasional discussions as to the value—even as to the reality—of such Revival seasons. But I confess that in some form they seem to me an essential part of that theology. If I held to one part of the system, I do not see how I could forego the other. If I believed that childhood and youth were in any sort strangers to the work of God's Spirit, I should hope, pray, agonize, that God's Spirit might come, might sweep up over them with the majesty of a returning tide of the ocean. And, because human nature is what it is,—we all bound together in sympathy,—I should know, that, when it swept one away with its embrace, it would take in another and another,—would take in a company of those who had been standing aloof together. I should hope for this; I should believe it. And, as it is, standing, as I do, upon the outside of these organizations, and looking on as an outsider; seeing, as I do, what it makes one's heart bleed to see, their young people all adrift, not knowing who they are, nor what they are, nor why they are; kindly, loving, and willing perhaps, but still told that they are alien from God; wanting principle, and knowing that they want it, but still conscious that they have never been swept away by this exceptional tide; and so standing shivering upon the brink, where they would gladly plunge in, but not plunging, because they are told that the ocean ought to overwhelm them,—that they cannot rush into it;—when I see this,—and I see it in every week of my life,—I can well understand how they, and those who are watching over them, should welcome even earthquake, if it would only rouse that ocean from its bed, that it may sweep up over this dry shore, gently float off these shivering children of God, and give them a chance to feel that they too are with Him,—that He is with them; they also buoyed up, and baptized, like all His other children, by the waters of His infinite love. If you believe that we have to wait for God's Spirit, it seems to me you must believe that God's Spirit will come in these sudden tempests. If you did not, you would die!

At the present time, the churches of the sad confessions in our part of the country are beginning to enjoy one of

these seasons of Revival. I have traced, at this length, the distinction between those churches and ours of a more joyous faith, simply that I may show why it is that they take a sort of interest in such a season which the churches on our side cannot profess to feel. I hope I have shown also, however, by the same distinction, that the occasion is for us also one of profound interest, though that interest be of a character somewhat different from theirs. The churches of the sad confessions, at an epoch like this, come up to our position. They come to stand where we say we are all the time. "We have been a people in darkness," they cry, "and we see a great light!" And we say, "We have seen that light all along." — "God's Spirit is close to us," they say, "eager to call us in!" And we say, "God's Spirit is always close to every child born of woman." We cannot, of course, profess to feel the sudden amazement of those who have just opened their eyes upon the light; but we can join them in joy that their eyes are opened. We have never felt that God waited before He could be gracious, or that His heart had been hardened even by our forgetfulness. All the more can we rejoice that they do not feel so now.

And, on the other hand, now that they step upon our position as if they had discovered it, — as we see them, with the frantic joy of new discoverers, exulting in the absolute presence of God with His children; sobbing themselves to sleep with happy tears, because they know they rest on God's bosom; waking to light with a glad enthusiasm, because they feel that this is God's light, and this is God's life, — that God is swaying their thoughts, God helping their resolves, God strengthening their purposes for the day, — as their humblest labors shine because illumined by this light divine, you and I cannot help turning to question ourselves. We have always professed this. Our whole system rests on the absolute presence of the Father with his children. We have professed it; and how far have we felt it? Do we live, from day to day, in that peace, which passes all understanding, of those who are with God, and feel God with them? Has active life for us the energy of those who work with God? Is sleep the complete blessing that it is to little children coming back into His arms to rest, and casting upon Him their care? Is every day, in short, the cheerful enterprise of His happy children, whom He leads forth into His vineyard every day to work with Him, — who are to come back at night to tell Him the story of the effort

in which He has helped them, to share with Him the joy of the day's endeavor, and to cast upon Him its cares?

Our position is not the same as that of our friends who are seeing just now the rising of the tide of this Revival, and who are praying God that it may rise high. But we also have to watch it and them; and we have our lessons to take to heart as it rises. And we must join them in praying that it does not fall. I think I have a right, therefore, to condense, from the distinctions I have been laying down, a few specific statements as to the Duties of a Revival and its Dangers, both to those who are in the midst of it, and to those who are looking on.

First, as to those who are in the midst of it; and this the more briefly, because it is not so much our business.

1. Let them take care, with all watchfulness, to keep what they gain. Let them see that they gain their converts by such real process as shall hold them. When Robinson Crusoe, and the other oarsmen in the boat, were flung together into the sea, they were all whirled up upon the beach; but all, except him, were drawn back by the under-tow just where they were before. He, out of all, was the only one who had the strength and self-command so to cling to the rocks upon which he was hurled, that, while each advancing wave threw him upward, no receding wave should draw him down. All those who deal with rising floods ought to bear this inevitable under-tow in mind, and to guard against it well.

2. I should say no Revival could succeed at all, where men turned aside at all from the distinct object. That object is the bringing laggard souls to the sense of the real presence of God. Gain this, I should say, and let all else follow. If, while you are pressing on to this mark, you stop at the way-side to chat about any thing beside; if you bring in one controverted point of theology; if you have a word of denunciation of any man, or any body of men; if you care a straw for the strength of a congregation, or the reputation of a preacher, or the growth of a sect, — your cause is lost. The only possible success of a Revival is its bringing individual souls closer and more constantly to God. Seek that, and let all else go.

3. And therefore every Revival implies — and, I think, to a certain extent effects — a remission of the tight bonds

of orthodoxy. I do not know if this seems a paradox ; but I do know it is true. The great awakening of the last century, when Whitefield set us all into a blaze, gave us this great Methodist body, whose gentle reliance on God's favor brings about in theology what men call Arminianism, so much more loving than the sternness of Calvinism ; and brings about in practice the tolerance and generous feeling which characterize the Methodism of to-day. And I do not see why I should not speak of the present time. The eminent preacher now in Boston, Mr. Finney, has calmly and bravely accepted the logical consequence of his own Revival preaching. "Here is God ; now is God !" — that is the secret of Revival preaching now, as it was when Jesus and the Twelve waked up all Galilee by crying, "God is here ; God is now !" Mr. Finney long since accepted the inevitable conclusion from this truth ; namely, "If the eternal God is absolutely here now, — as, in some great Revival, seems so clear, — He must be here always. There can be no moments when we cannot see Him. His absolute presence helps the child in every instant. The child works with the Father, and the Father with the child, always. There is then nothing which the child cannot perform ; and Paul spoke in very fact, and not in metaphor, when he said, 'To them gave he power to become the sons of God.'" — From this inevitable conclusion of Revival preaching, that great Revivalist has not flinched. He believes, as we believe, that *the tide of the Spirit is always at high water*. And so, on his own side of the church, they criticize him and his, as much as they dare, as "Perfectionists ;" that is, as those who believe that men may be perfect, "even as their Father in heaven is perfect," and because He is. Nor does he reject the criticism. He is firm in the position he has taken. And though, when you and I go to hear him preach, we may hear a good deal left of the language of old Calvinism, — for habits of language, you know, are the last things we abandon, — none the less is the doctrine beneath that language the doctrine from which old Calvinism is to meet its inevitable doom. It is the Quaker doctrine, the Methodist doctrine, the Ultra-unitarian doctrine, the Transcendentalist doctrine, — that God is every moment with every child of man, in a union so close that nothing can be compared with it ; the doctrine with which Jesus broke the spell of the ages, when he cried to all men to repent, because the empire of God was in no upper sky, or in no

future heaven, but here, at hand ; — His Spirit with our spirit ; and we — bless God ! — though we forget Him so often — all powerless to separate the two.

4th, and in a word, to all those in orthodox communions who regret the machinery, the formalism, the cant, and the excitement of these Revivals, their lesson is, — If you would escape all this, you must abandon the religious system of which the Revival is a part essential. Do not complain of a detail, when you can save yourself from the responsibility of a detail by abandoning, out and out, the system to which the detail belongs.

Now, to sum up what I have said as to our share, which is perhaps the only side of duty of which we need speak here at all : —

1st, Let us beware how we look for the ridiculous sides of this convulsion. Let us remember that the convulsion is a necessary part of the system from which it springs ; that every return of a Revival improves that system, even in its tendencies to destroy it. In such an upheaving, there must be great misfortunes, some absurdities of statement, nay, perhaps some blasphemies. Do let us speak of these as if we were glad of them. We must mourn for them too. They are wounds in the great body of Christ, of which body we also are.*

2d, If we were asked why we did not join on our side with those who are using this and that extraordinary means for such Revival, we should say, that we always recognize the absolute presence of the Father in our lives ; that His Spirit cannot come closer than it has been in the absolute communion which always it offers. Very well. We can say this. Let us see, every man, how much he has felt it. How constantly has he sought that present Spirit, and found it ? How truly has he lived, and moved, and had his being, with his God, as a child who has not known where the Father's wish ended, and where his own began ?

Of which I might say so much more ! But to ask these questions is to be certain of a sad answer. God grant us to improve on the answers every day ; so to seek Him, that we shall find Him. In especial, day by day, let us see, in that matter of our children's growth, that we do not leave them to machinery. No matter how good the school, nor how docile the child. You and I, with our theology, have no right to leave the child to some earthquake in the future

to bring him to his God. Pray God for him to-day. Show him how to pray; and without catechism, without set form, without any thing of machinery, let the boy or girl catch from the inspiration of your own life that sense of the help of God which shall make them too, even in childhood's temptations, seek help, and find help, by consecrating their lives to Him.

3d, And these suggestions lead us to this resolve, that, if we do not attempt by extraordinary methods to revive the church by calling outcasts in, we see to it that we ourselves are not cast away. There is a Revival for each man to undertake, pray for, and watch for, as every morning wakes him to new life, — revives him from the sleep of night and the fatigue of yesterday. Is God here with us always? Then we, of such infinite nature, must be advancing always; to-day must be a stepping-stone for to-morrow; prayers, words, works, and rest each day must be on a level of more assured habit, and more hopeful, loving faith, of keener consciousness of His presence, than those of the day before. And this demand is made not on one of us, or two, but on every man of us all who has the wit to know what God is, and how near God will come. It is by this revival of every heart that our whole church will be re-born every day. The wall of our Jerusalem will grow, as a friend has said,* because each man builds over against his own house, where, for himself, he can collect the masonry, and where most clearly he sees the need.

4th, And if we ask, as we hardly dare to, why there should be any who in these days can hold to those sad theologies which throw so much gloom upon religion, and really require such flashes of lightning and such whirling tempests to clear away its murky, suffocating pressure now and then, we are to find the answer in our own indifference, in our own formality, yes, in the hardness of our own hearts. We have founded our churches on the principle of the broadest liberty. Each man has the right, we cry, to come with his own creed, with his own confession, to his God. Heaven has been opened, the Father is with all His chil-

* The late Rev. W. G. Swett. . . . "All this were well; but this will not suffice. We must build around us the wall of faith, even as Nehemiah restored the defences of his own Jerusalem, — 'Every man over against his own house.' When we do this, God will bless us with a true Revival, not curse us with dangerous excitement. And here is the distinction we are too prone to lose sight of, between the transient and the permanent, — between a true Revival, the hope of man, blessed of God, and a spurious Revival, resulting from human machinery and untempered zeal."

dren, and begs them all to come to His arms. That declaration would sweep this world, Christian and Heathen, all into the same fold of love, if only those who make it with the lip lived up to its magnificent requisitions; if morning, noon, and night saw them working with the life of God, conscious of His help, praying as they work, and working as they pray; if the central will of God, His infinite desire that this world should come to him, were the central and infinite desire of all these separate children who proclaim Him so near; if, behind every other ambition, there were this ambition, under every effort this effort, to join our powers with His almightiness, to the end that His will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. There are enrolled on the lists of those, who say they believe in the love of God to all his children, enough to work out this miracle of miracles, when their belief expresses itself in their lives. Let them so seek the Spirit as to find it; let them search for it with all their hearts; let them so plunge into the ocean as to be buoyed up by it; so work with the God who is all ready to work with them,— and there will begin the Revival which never pales. That Revival of our separate faith, so limp and weak, wilted, will be the beginning of the infinite Revival of this world, in which all separate seasons of rejoicing will run together, and become one!

